



MORE Than What You See!

: A Day in the Life of a Municipal Waste Worker in Sri Lanka

An illustrated book by Malith De Silva & Nishara Fernando

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Suggested citation: De Silva, M., & Fernando, N. (2024). MORE Than What You See

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.13754669

Concept, photography and book design by Malith De Silva





ILLUSTRATED BOOK SERIES OF THE SPIRIT PROJECT ON TRANSFORMATIONS OF WASTE MANAGEMENT IN SOUTH ASIA DURING AND AFTER COVID-19

This illustrated book series publishes results of the research project “**Transformation of waste management practices and policies in South Asia during and after the COVID-19 pandemic: Impacts on gender equality and sustainability**” funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation under the Swiss Programme for International Research by Scientific Investigation Teams (SPIRIT). The project is carried out collaboratively by a team of researchers from the Institute of Geography and Sustainability, University of Lausanne; the School of Social Work Fribourg, University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Western Switzerland; the Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities; and the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research.

The illustrated books & working papers are openly accessible through the repository of the University of Lausanne (<https://serval.unil.ch>) and the project website <https://lifeofwaste.com>.

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Introduction

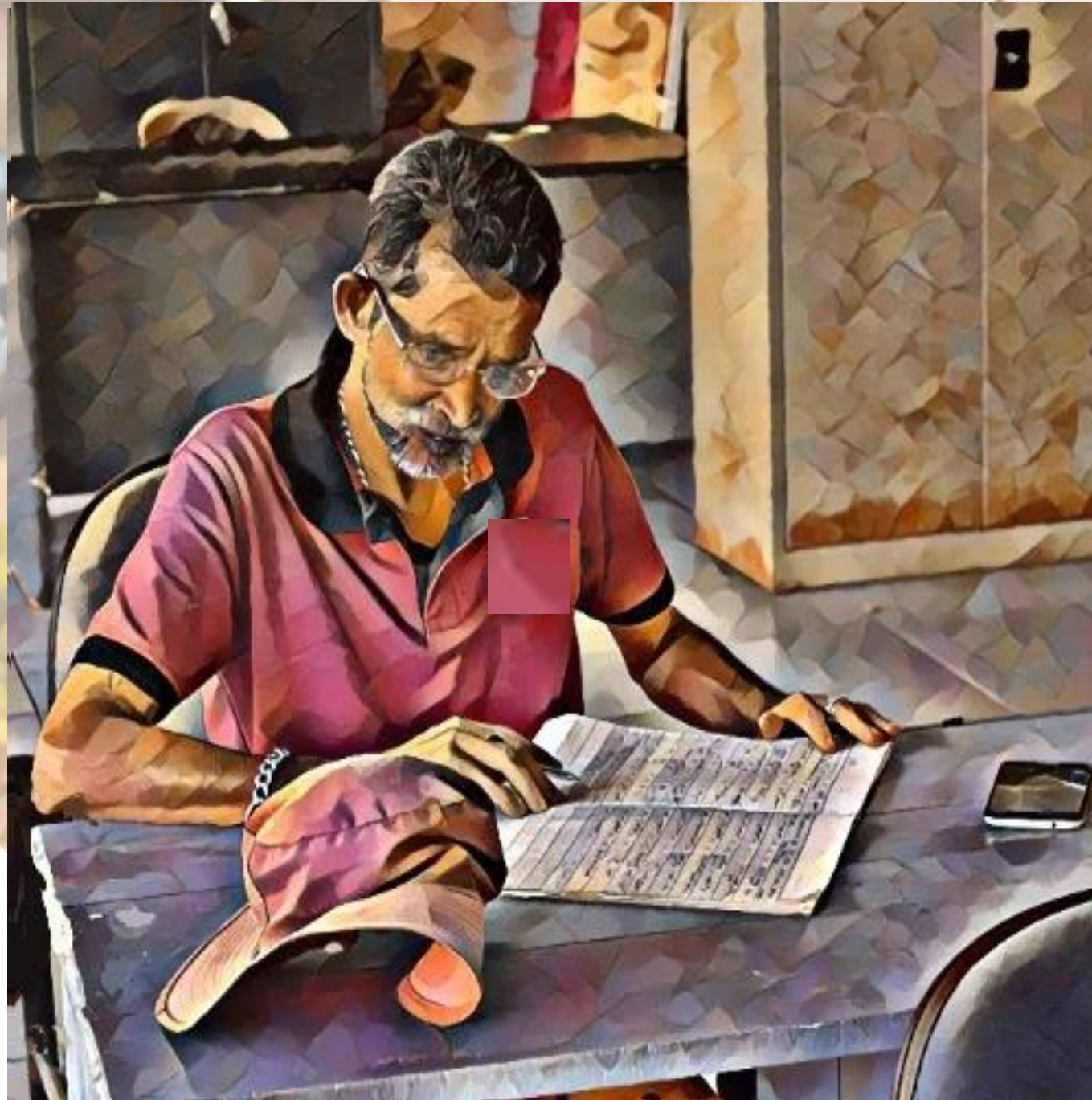
In late 2023, we met Raju, a waste collector who has been working for a local council in Colombo, Sri Lanka, since 1998. We met him because we were doing a shadowing exercise with waste workers for our research project. This illustrated book is based on what we learned from shadowing Raju. The aim of the book is to enlighten the public and academics alike about the complex work life of a municipal waste worker in Sri Lanka.

Shadowing is a way of collecting data for research. It means following someone throughout their day to see what they actually do.^[1] In this case, we followed Raju to see how his workday goes.

To protect his identity, we have given him a different name and changed his looks. So, Raju is not his real name, but everything else we are telling you here is reality as we experienced it.

[1] Quinlan, E. (2008). Conspicuous invisibility: Shadowing as a data collection strategy. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14(8), 1480-1499.

Raju reports to work



Raju's day starts when he wakes up around 4.00 a.m. as he has to leave home around 5:30 a.m. to catch an early bus.

After a 45-minute bus ride, Raju arrives at the municipal waste collection center around 6:15 a.m. His work officially starts at 6:30 a.m. when he signs the register of attendance and uses the fingerprint machine.

Getting up so early and travelling for 45 minutes after doing a physically challenging job can exert many negative impacts on Raju including losing a considerable amount of time out of their day, stress, fatigue and general dissatisfaction.^[2]

Getting ready

After signing in, Raju changes into his office attire in a makeshift changing room situated in a corner of the waste collection center. As you can see here, Raju places his travelling clothes into a recycled locker, which he and his colleagues obtained after someone discarded it.

They have painted it white and blue and added some locks for security. Unfortunately, this makeshift room is necessary because the original changing room and the common room of the office were demolished in early 2019 due to the expansion of the nearby main road. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis the reconstruction of the rooms is still on halt.



Nature of Raju's work

As you know, Raju works for a local council in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He receives a fixed monthly salary of around 34,000 Sri Lankan rupees (approximately 112 USD). Additionally, Raju is eligible for a pension when he retires at the age of 55.

He has other rights, such as the ability to request sick leave and medical leave, and he receives social benefits from the local council. This type of worker, who is employed in an organized space with rules and regulations, is referred to as a 'formal worker'.

Then, there are workers who are not working for an organization with rules and regulations and do not get the same benefits as a formal worker. These workers are called 'informal workers. In Sri Lanka over 63% of the employed workers belong to the informal sector.^{[3] [4]}

[3] Balamurali, N. (2022) Nature and characteristics of youth informal employment in Sri Lanka. Proceeding of the International Open University Research Sessions, The Open University of Sri Lanka.

[4] If you would like to know more about informal work, we have explored the lives of informal waste workers in the following working paper:
https://serval.unil.ch/resource/serval:BIB_EBF6B5DF1B3F.P001/REF

Raju and the team

Here you see Raju's waste collection vehicle, a four-ton tipper truck, along with his team members. As shown in the picture, there are four team members: the driver, Raju, and two other men.

Raju and one of his colleagues work as 'waste loaders' responsible for collecting and loading the waste to the tipper truck. The other waste collector stands on top of the waste and evenly distributes it on the truck to maximize the use of space.

As the local council has a limited number of vehicles, they are overloaded and overworked just like the waste collectors. As a result, waste collection vehicles often breakdown disrupting waste collection.





Raju is responsible for collecting waste from households and businesses along his designated route. The routes given to Raju and his team are determined by the officers at the waste collection centre. The local council has designated specific days for waste collection: some days are for collecting segregated (separated) bio-degradable (perishable) waste, while other days are for collecting non-biodegradable (non-perishable) waste such as plastics and polythene.^[5]

In the first picture above, you can see Raju inspecting waste at a nearby supermarket to ensure it has been properly segregated. In the second picture, Raju is knocking on a household door to inform them that they have put out the wrong type of waste for that day.



[5] If you would like to know more about waste collection by local councils, you can read our book ‘Municipal Solid Waste Management in Sri Lanka’
https://serval.unil.ch/resource/serval:BIB_F748BD AFFA1A.P001/REF



Raju and his avatars

During the shadowing of Raju over several days, we gained a much deeper understanding of a waste worker's life. The exercise revealed many 'avatars of Raju' that made us question our understanding of the world.



Raju - the peripatetic

Did you know that 'peripatetic' is a term used to describe a wandering traveler?

We think Raju has peripatetic traits. On average, Raju walked over 31,000 steps on the days we shadowed him, which is nearly 25 kilometres a day. Medical advice suggests that a person of Raju's age should walk between 3,000 and 9,000 steps daily.^[6]

As you can see, Raju walks more than twice the maximum recommended number of steps in just seven hours. A bit too much, don't you think?

[6] Tudor-Locke, C., Craig, C. L., Aoyagi, Y., Bell, R. C., Croteau, K. A., De Bourdeaudhuij, I., ... & Blair, S. N. (2011). How many steps/day are enough? For older adults and special populations. *International journal of behavioral nutrition and physical activity*, 8, 1-19.

Raju - the Olympic waste lifter

Raju is an Olympic-level waste lifter. To illustrate, Raju works with a tipper that can carry four tons of waste, and often even more. There are two individuals who load the waste into the vehicle: Raju and his colleague.

Let's Calculate

Capacity of waste collection truck = 4,000 Kg

Number of waste loaders = 2 Loaders

Amount of waste Raju lifts in a day = 2,000 Kg

Isn't that comparable to the feats of an Olympic-level waste lifter?



20 Kg

Raju - the Communicator

We also discovered that Raju plays the role of a communicator, acting as a liaison between the local council and the residents.

In the illustration, you can see Raju speaking with a resident who had stopped to ask whether the waste workers collect adult diapers. Raju explained that, according to the local council's regulations, his team cannot collect adult diapers. Raju promised the resident, that he would discuss with his superiors and inform him of the most appropriate way of managing the diapers.

Also, Raju often received complaints and concerns from residents, which he then conveys to his senior officers to ensure they are addressed.



Raju - the traffic controller



Another role Raju plays is that of a traffic controller. Here, you can see Raju managing traffic on the main road. Raju performs this task throughout the waste collection process to assist the driver, as the large waste collection vehicle requires a driver's assistant to navigate turns and maneuver through the 50 or so narrow streets.

Raju often faces difficulties with vehicle drivers and residents because his actions can sometimes cause traffic congestion. In such situations, some drivers even shout profanities at Raju and his team.

From what we saw, without Raju's assistance, the large vehicle would cause even greater traffic congestions.

Raju - the gymnast

Raju is a gymnast. We observed that loading waste onto the tipper requires acrobatic-like movements with precision and good hand-eye coordination.

Raju effortlessly handles buckets of waste weighing around 20 kilograms. With momentum, he throws them towards the loader on top of the tipper, who catches them and simultaneously returns the empty bucket to Raju. Raju then places it on the ground and sends another waste bucket towards his colleague.

This coordinated rhythm enables him to complete the waste collection process quickly and with minimal effort. Did you ever imagine that 54-year-old Raju would be such an adept acrobat?



Raju - the tip collector

Raju is also a tip collector. In addition to his formal wage paid by the local council, Raju gets donations from residents and businesses, which are usually given (sometimes unwillingly) as a token of appreciation.

These donations typically range from 50 LKR. to 100 rupees (approximately 0.16 - 0.32 USD). Occasionally, when someone needs to dispose of specific items that the local council typically does not collect, such as furniture, sanitary pads etc. Raju and his team may collect a slightly higher donation, ranging from 500 to 1000 LKR. (approximately 1.50 - 3.00 USD) to dispose of them at the dumping site.

These collections are useful to the waste collectors to cover their daily expenses including transport, food and other things (we will talk about 'other things' in an upcoming page).



Brunch with a catch



Around 11:30 or 11:45, Raju and his team take a break for brunch. This meal, which falls between breakfast and lunch, is their primary meal while working.

They get their brunch from a restaurant midway through their route. The restaurant offers the meal at a very low cost, making it almost free for the waste collection team. During the days we shadowed Raju, the team had rice and curry with fish, and the total cost for the meal for all four members was only about 150 rupees (0.50 USD).

The cheap meal is given in exchange for Raju and the team accepting large amounts of waste from the restaurant. As per regulations, the restaurant needs to pay an additional fee to the local council as a large waste producer. But having an informal arrangement with Raju and the team helps the restaurant to avoid the additional fee.

Formal and Informal work together?

You might be a little confused now after seeing Raju engaging in informal arrangements discussed above despite being a formal waste collector. You might be thinking, ‘Didn’t you say earlier that formal and informal work are two separate things that are different from each other?’

Yes! we did. Though they are different from each other, they can co-exist, just like Raju and Raju’s reflection. Specially in instances where formal mechanisms fail to serve the interest of one or more parties, informal solutions come in to existence. This is mostly due to the flexibility of informality that allows for quick and effective solutions to problems in waste collection.

So, informality and formality are inseparably intertwined, so that when one is performed the other is evoked.^[7]

[7] Smart, A., & Koster, M. (2024). Beyond Formal-Informal Dichotomies. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Anthropology*.

Finishing the collection route

Raju and his team finish work and complete waste collection around 2.30 in the afternoon. In the illustration, you can see Raju, as the senior waste collector, dividing the donations they received among the three individuals according to seniority.

After finishing the waste collection, Raju and the team return to the waste collection centre. From there, the driver proceeds to transport the collected waste to the Karadiyana waste disposal site, situated 9 Km away in the Borlasgamuwa Urban Council area. For the disposal of segregated non-biodegradable and biodegradable waste, the local council has to pay a fee of 5000 rupees (approximately over 16.00 USD) per truck.

The perishable waste collected by Raju and the team will eventually be converted to compost at the Karadiyana waste management center.^[8]



[8] If you would like to know more about waste disposal in Colombo listen to our podcast at <https://www.youtube.com/@lifeofwaste7738>



A bit of chit chat

After completing the route, Raju first catches up with his friends who are collecting waste on other routes. They gather in the former changing room, which no longer has walls.

Here, they relax for a bit, enjoying the breeze that cools them down, looking at the fast-paced city life beyond the room. Raju and his team members also smoke a cigarette or two to unwind. They chat about their daily experiences and, of course, share office gossip.

The former changing room, which is more of a veranda now, is also used to dry their work clothes. They have set up makeshift clothing lines from one beam to another.

Time for a wash

After having a chat for about 30 minutes to 1 hour, Raju and his colleagues have a wash.

They do not have a dedicated facility to change and to have a bath, despite them working with waste. Since they are located in a commercial building that is owned by the local council, they use the common washing facilities available to them.

Including Raju, a total of 78 waste collectors use the one and only bathroom on their floor. But as it is shared with other habitants of the building, waste collectors sometimes have to wait a long time to use the washroom.



Bit of fun after work

After having a quick wash, Raju and his colleagues have a little bit of fun at the office. They gather in a corner of the office, adjacent to the makeshift changing area we discussed earlier.

There they continue the chit chat and relax until the shift ends at around 4.00 p.m. They smoke a few cigarettes, and also drink a bottle of old arrack (a local alcohol brand), which they would buy using the donations from the residents.



Raju- Intoxicated throughout



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We observed that Raju consumed various substances throughout his workday. He started the day by smoking a cigarette while chatting with us. During waste collection, he smoked 10 more cigarettes. Additionally, he purchased a small packet of marijuana and smoked it at the end of route while consuming a full bottle of old arrack.

Raju explained to us that consuming these substances helps him handle waste, recover from aches and pains and relax. Raju is by definition is a ‘work hard, play hard’ kind of a guy!

A hard job

It must be quite evident to you now that Raju's work life is extremely arduous. He starts his day early, lifts a lot of waste, and walks a great deal.

So, after shadowing him closely for a few days, we asked him why he continues to do such a difficult job. Raju explained that as the man of the house, with a housewife and five children, it is his responsibility as the father and the sole breadwinner to take care of his family.

He also mentioned that despite the hardships and lacking opportunities to be promoted, he has persevered because he receives a fixed income and a pension. For someone from a low-income background like Raju, the income and job security of being a formal waste collector is invaluable.



A man with glasses and a red shirt is looking down at a laptop in a workshop. The background is a collage of images showing people working in various settings, including a construction site and a factory.

Many issues intersecting

Raju's hard life cannot be understood solely in terms of his gender or socio-economic status. Instead, we can use the 'intersectionality framework'^[9] introduced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw to identify the specific ways in which factors such as low-income status, masculinity and nature of work intersect to shape his experience in a manner distinct from that of individuals who do not share the same social identities.

For instance, Raju's identity as a man intersects with social expectations of masculinity (being a man), influencing his acceptance of challenging work conditions. This social pressure contributes to his use of drugs as a coping mechanism to manage the physical and mental demands of his job. Raju's low-income background intersects with his employment as a waste worker, exacerbating his vulnerability to exploitation. This socio-economic status limits his opportunities for advancement within the workforce, reinforcing a cycle of low pay and difficult working conditions.

[9] Crenshaw, K. W. (2013). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. In *The public nature of private violence* (pp. 93-118). Routledge.

Conclusion



Shadowing Raju provided an invaluable opportunity to delve into the work life of a formal waste worker employed by a local council in Colombo. Raju's job is demanding, requiring significant mental and physical exertion as he takes on multiple roles throughout the day. Despite the challenging nature of his work, neither his salary nor the facilities available to him adequately compensate for his efforts.

It is essential to recognize and appreciate the dedication of formal waste workers like Raju, who endure numerous challenges while being unfairly compensated, yet continue to contribute to cleanliness and hygiene in Colombo.



Malith De Silva is a Researcher at the Federation of Sri Lanka Local Government Authorities (FSLGA), Sri Lanka. His research interests include municipal solid waste management, displacement & relocation, children as a vulnerable group, disaster management & resilience etc.

malithsilva10@gmail.com



Nishara Fernando is a Professor in Sociology at the Department of Sociology of the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka. His research interests include municipal solid waste management, displacement & relocation, disaster management & resilience etc.

nishara.fernando@soc.cmb.ac.lk

